

All the world's a... Mapping the Shield of Aeneas

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In the last *Omnibus*, Richard Rutherford explored the description of the Shield of Achilles in *Iliad* 18. Here Maya Feile Tomes looks at the way in which the idea of seeing the world in a shield was taken up not only by Virgil but also by the writers of Latin epics celebrating the discovery of the Americas.

*All the world's a shield,
And all the men and women
merely players*

– as Shakespeare never said. For the philosopher Jaques in *As You Like It*, it is the stage – not the shield I have just shoe-horned into his best-known couplet – that is the metaphor of choice when it comes to thinking of ways to go about representing the world. It raises an interesting question, though, about the different kinds of object which have been perceived as having this function in literature across the ages. In classical and classicizing literary culture (and in epic poetry in particular), one of the devices most commonly used in this capacity is – you've guessed it – the shield. Shields in this tradition are frequently invested with global, even galactic, symbolism. They are 'cosmic icons'.

Not just any old shields, though: the shields we are talking about are highly intricate items made from precious metals and covered in minute engravings. So detailed are they that their appearance in an epic poem almost invariably gives rise to an extended description or *ekphrasis* (*ek* + *phrasis*: literally a 'speaking' or a 'sounding out') of the imagery on their decorated surfaces, allowing the reader to visualize or 'see' the iconographic material depicted upon them.

In the Greek tradition, the best known example of this is the shield presented to Achilles by his mother, the nymph Thetis, in book 18 of Homer's *Iliad*, prompting a 130-line description of its surface – the subject of Richard Rutherford's piece in the last issue of *Omnibus*. In Roman literature, the classic case is the sequence in book 8 of Virgil's *Aeneid* in which Aeneas receives a shield from his own mother, Venus; there follows a 102-line description of the shield's surface, featuring highlights from Roman history.

There is no doubt that Virgil took inspiration in this from Homer and other earlier

Greek poets; indeed one way of explaining why he chose to include a shield episode in his epic is – as is so often the answer to Virgilian questions – *because Homer did*. But why? And where does the world come in?

Past, present, and future

Shields and worlds have a long association. In the case of the Shield of Achilles, the series of activities shown on the shield – scenes drawn from agricultural, civil, and other walks of life – have been interpreted as a way of bringing in more variety – *more of the world* – than would otherwise be possible in a poem narrowly focused on the Siege of Troy. The shield reminds us that there is a wider world out there, beyond the battlefield; indeed, it is precisely that wider world that makes sense of the Trojan War itself: families and cities, celebrations and society – the normal stuff of life – are all things worth fighting for; the stuff that makes life itself worth living.

In his own way, Virgil in his *Aeneid* likewise uses the device of the shield to bring in elements which properly belong outside the 'official' timeframe of the poem. Though the events from Roman history depicted on the shield may lie in the distant mythico-historical past for us, from the perspective of those in the poem they still lie far off in the *future*: Aeneas and his fellow mortals inhabit a remote mythical time long before any of the things shown on the shield ever occurred.

So Virgil too uses his shield as a way of gesturing towards the world outside the poem – in this case not so much in space as forwards through time, drawing in detail from the 'proleptic' future which would not otherwise find a place in an epic on the expeditions of the legendary Trojan hero Aeneas. Rome is still worlds away – which explains why Aeneas, famously,

does not understand the first thing about the images on which his eyes feast. The shield is a world apart.

The fact that this sort of episode occurs so frequently in ancient epic – Homer's and Virgil's are just two of many examples – in turn highlights an important feature about the epic genre itself. Epic poetry is often described as all-encompassing or 'totalizing', straining against its own narrative limits as it strives to co-opt anything and everything into the bounds of the poem. The busy visual programmes of these decorated shields offer an especially effective way of packing large quantities of information into a relatively small space; indeed, the very act of 'ekphrasizing' them can be said to function as a metaphor for the narrative project of epic itself. The genre's keen interest in shields thus points to a much deeper-running concern with maximizing possibilities for detail and description.

Shields are particularly well-suited to this in that their visual material is all represented in miniaturized form, as if seen from far away or high above (a geographical concept that was certainly available in the ancient world, as the Babylonian map reproduced on the right shows). The viewer-reader is forced to adopt a bird's-eye or god's-eye view, gazing down upon the shield as if upon Planet Earth itself.

Virgil expressly plays on this association between shield and globe in his poem, repeatedly using the term *orbis* – such as when he evokes the dolphins swimming in a circular pattern around the device's surface (*in orbem*) – to refer to Aeneas's shield. *Orbis* denotes roundness, of course, but its other meaning is 'world': the standard Roman term for the inhabited Earth, after all, was *orbis terrarum* (literally 'circle of lands'). World space is thus profoundly associated with circularity; and these shields, like the *orbis terrarum* itself, are round.

Virgil's influence

So much for Virgil and his predecessors. But when it comes to interpreting the Shield of Aeneas, we have another diagnostic tool at our disposal: what came afterwards, in the *post-Virgilian* tradition.

This may seem counter-intuitive. After all, when seeking to explain a particular literary phenomenon, our kneejerk response is to look at what came earlier – in this case to poems like Homer's. But it can be equally if not more instructive to look also at what came later, examining how subsequent writers read, received, and responded to Virgil. In fact, arguably one of the most illuminating ways of detecting meaning in a text is to see what later writers made of it, for the things they perceive as meaningful can alert us to aspects of significance in the original itself. Literary responses are themselves acts of interpretation.

A glance forwards across the later tradition is instrumental in confirming the deep-seated connection between shield and world which we have detected (or suspected) in the ancient context. Writing in the generation after Virgil, the Roman poet Ovid was among the first to be completely explicit about this dimension of the shield's meaning: in his first century A.D. post-Virgilian epic the *Metamorphoses*, he refers in book 13 to a *clypeus uasti caelatus imagine mundi* (*Met.* 13.110) – a shield 'embossed with an image of the big wide world'. (In fact what he is describing here is no less than the Shield of Achilles itself, meaning that he is re-working – or rather interpreting – Homer as well.)

But we can also look later still, not just to the next generations but to the next centuries, even the next millennium. After all, epic poetry did not simply cease to be written after the 'fall' of the Roman Empire: on the contrary, it continued to be produced with great gusto, especially during the era commonly known as the 'Renaissance' or early modern period (c. fifteenth–eighteenth centuries) when renewed interest in the ancient world prompted extensive re-readings of, and responses to, Greco-Roman authors. Intense engagement with Virgil in particular led to a profusion of Virgilian-style epic poetry – and one of the features most commonly re-worked is of course the shield.

Virgil in the Americas

Two especially instructive examples are furnished by a pair of Virgilian-style poems drawn from a little-known group of early modern poems known as the 'Columbus epics'. Columbus epics do exactly what they say on the tin: they are poems on the subject of Christopher Columbus's transatlantic voyage and 'discovery' of America in 1492.

It is not hard to see why Columbus's exploits were felt to fit the Virgilian paradigm so well: like Aeneas's, Columbus's too is a tale of striking out into the western unknown on a perilous voyage

towards a new land which in time will become the seat of a great empire. Virgil could never in his wildest dreams have imagined how uncanny his plot would prove! And of course, as befits these Aeneas-like figures, the heroes of these Columbus epics are regularly presented with special kinds of weapon, of which the poets then offer an extended *ekphrasis*.

The first of our examples is from a seventeenth-century Columbus epic entitled *Atlantis Retecta* ('Atlantis Uncovered') composed by a young German poet named Vincentius Placcius; the second occurs in a late-eighteenth-century poem, *De Invento Novo Orbe* ('On the Discovery of the New World'), by a writer named José Manuel Peramás who was born in Spain but spent twelve years in Paraguay. Both contain key sequences conducted either shortly before or after arriving in the Americas in which Columbus is presented with a shield either by a Thetis-like nymph or by the goddess Atlantis herself. The *ekphrasis* which ensue reveal that the picture emblazoned on the shields, in both cases, is some sort of cartographic image. In fact, it is a representation of America itself.

Both poets are perfectly clear about their coordinates. At the centre (*in medio*) is Panama, occupying the position reserved for the all-important Battle of Actium (*in medio*) on the Shield of Aeneas, only now obeying a criterion not of historical importance but rather of geographical reality. In the upper half of the disc is the continental mass of North America; in the lower lies Latin America. If we plot these coordinates then we discover that the disc-like surface areas of these shields must be more or less identical to – 'co-extensive' with – the standard 'planispheric' representation of the American double continent familiar to authors then (*above*) as well as now (*below*). In other words, America is *mapped on* to the shield.

After its Panamanian starting point, Placcius then moves onwards all the way down to the Strait of Magellan in the extreme south; Peramás proceeds from Panama to Peru to Paraguay and, ultimately, into Amazonia. He even coils the River Amazon itself around the shield's edge, just as Homer borders his shield with River Ocean and Virgil his with the silvery dolphin-filled sea (*in orbem*). The geometry of the shield becomes the geography of America.

Until now we have been speaking about shield as world in a series of metaphorical ways. Courtesy of these poets we can move beyond this, from shield-as-world as metaphor to shield as actual map. Now when Peramás tells us that the Amazon at the edge of his shield is the mightiest river *in orbe*, we no longer know whether he means on the shield (*in orbe*) or in the whole world (*in orbe*) – or both. The

boundary between the two has become completely blurred. Really, though, this simply stages a return to the roots of the figure: to the core association between shield and world which has been there all along.

The geographer Denis Cosgrove referred to Homer's Shield of Achilles as the 'founding figure of the Western cartographic imagination', and here we witness the literalization of that idea. Both depend on the same basic conceptual operation: maps, like shields (not to mention maps on shields), presuppose a view as if from a height so great that huge amounts of detail – be it the sweep of Roman history or entire countries, even entire continents – can be apprehended within a single field of vision. In other words, ekphrastic shields have never *not* been map-like. Homer and Virgil thematize it; Ovid detects it; Peramás and Placcius really run with it, taking the association to its ultimate logical conclusion. All the shield's the world.

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